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Charles Erskine Scott Wood
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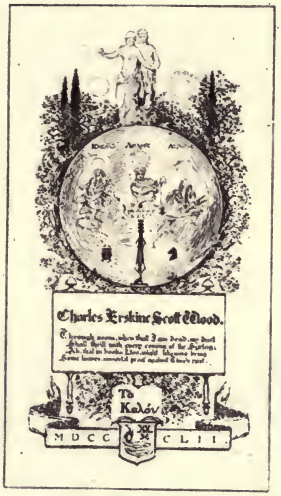
Given in Memory of

JAMES R. CALDWELL

Sonnets

Throughout ane many years
begot of introspective sense
and love for kith and kin.



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I

I celebrate in hesitating lines,
As Autumn leaves falter through the crisp air,
A garden blossoming beneath the care
Of one whose love on me unaltered shines
As the sun on these tall-grown and rugged pines.
Well I remember how she would not spare
The smallest nursling and now how fair
A wilderness, outbursting all design.
This is her poem coaxed from stubborn clay;
Her life-joy wrought in tree and blossom shoots.
Though I must wander in my soul's pursuits
I know her love follows my vagrant way,
Sure that our memories of yesterday
Are life-threads twined like interlaced roots.

This garden is but little plot of ground:
A hedge of holly pricks the outer foe;
A graveled path between dwarf trees a-row,
Peach, pear, apple, cherries ruby round;
In the southeast corner a grove of firs is found,
There roses climb and beds of iris blow
And as eyes of children peeping below
Tear-dewed lids, April's blue violets abound.
Glossy periwinkle creeps, purple and white
Clothing, some rough rock-steps with tenderness
As charity aught cloak in gentleness
Our every thought; and birds in evening flight
Rest on great cherry trees in chattering delight
'Till the garden sleeps in star-lit quietness.

There is a group of oak and beech and pines,
Shady in the day and spicy in the night;
And a walnut, thirsty for the eastern light,
Throws its long leafy arms above the lines
Of trellised fruit trees. When the hot sun climbs
To August noon, this shady grove invites
Me and my book. Here children take delight
And here I watch my brother ant's designs.
Hidden in this dark temple's deepest part
Where robins build and finches grow half tame
A Japan maple spreads its boughs of flame,
A burning altar 'till its leaves depart
One by one; as our hopes leave the heart,
But Spring shall newer buds to life reclaim.

On the Southern slope some terraced grapevines run
And the fir grove points its spires up to the sky,
Inviting children of the air and sun
To perch awhile and chirrup fitfully.
I like to be here on the silky grass
Watching these swift sky-passengers in flight:
A saucy mob which pass and over-pass,
Stealing our cherries boldly in our sight.
Here I breathe strawberry leaves, when warm, the ground
Is mellow with the drying fragrancy
Of Summer. Robber-calls and chirps resound
From thieves who wrangle in sweet melody.
So listening to the parliament of birds,
My heart with love for all that lives is stirred.

Tulips red and yellow, arow and starred,
Goblets of beauty along the turfy lawn
Where new-bathed robins bask, fluffed in the sun.
Pretty things. The stolid heart is hard
Which slays the quick and cheerful little bard
Of Springtime groves. A poet's curse upon
All murderers of the poets of the Dawn.
Against the northern street sentinels stand guard;
Pine, larch and linden, horsechestnuts, servers
With altar-candles lifted to the Spring:
Their arms love-locked and close about their knees
As a dancer's skirts, bloomy shrubs and fleur-
De-lis, azaleas and spirea cling.
The city noises sift subdued through these.

The western edge repeats the northern band,
Screening from noisy streets my study door
Where reverently at peace I sit before
The shifting magic of a master hand,
Which rules the circus of the days and planned
The myriad show. I watch the cloud's down-pour;
The robins bathing in small pools which store
The rain awhile upon a freshened land.
Zephyr hurrying, fragrant and unseen,
Shakes a moment the green-sword iris blade;
Or by azalea's golden locks delayed,
Plays with her tenderly. A wildwood scene,
Walled in by streets: a wilderness of green
Which holds me hushed as if an angel prayed.

Hollyhocks hold straight their lances tall,
Bannered so gay; white stock and gilliflowers
Verulam loved; gold dials of the hours,
Sunflowers creep slow their shadows on the wall;
Plums and grapes where southward the slopes fall
And a straight path between two jasmine bowers.
Honeysuckles, dripping with June showers,
Intoxicate the air and reveling night moths call
At these free taverns; a Persian rose,
Perchance from Sadi's garden or Omar's,
Clasps as a bridegroom might the waiting bars
And boldly to my lady's chamber goes;
Here troops the pageant past white Winter's snows
To Spring's young laughter underneath the stars.

My garden calendar marks the drift of days;
For when snowdrops and crocuses dance forth,
I know the sun begins to love the North.
Liverwort, bluebells and daffodillies praise
A kindly March, who from the frosty ways
Calls them with cup and song to tell his birth.
April to her gay host libation poureth
And purple finches sing love-lengthened lays.
Suddenly a burst of cloudy bloom
Signals sweet May in softest robes of white.
Plums, cherries, pears keep the pure fires alight
Within her vestal fane; gone all too soon,
Though in her steps comes rose-crowned laughing June,
And wonder marks the daytime and the night.

Bold larks are tuning their unstudied flutes
While yet the whirling rain speaks Winter ills.
Brave pussy willows bare their velvet shoots
To mark their hidden and awaking thrills.
First bridesmaids of the Sun who face cold sleet
To publish tidings of the coming Spring.
The daring confidence of birds is sweet,
Good the undaunted song the field-larks sing.
And good the willow's silver gleaming tones,
I love to hear the lark above the blast,
Scoffing at dying Winter's gusty groans
And know the cold and gloomy days are past.
Earth gives us pledges life shall live again,
The willow's sparks, the lark's call through the rain.

I watch old Earth smile to the gipsy year
In this green sanctuary from the streets.
Less than an acre are its bounds and metes,
Yet infinite the wonders working here.
In February liverwort appears
With feathered troubadours from South retreats,
And in July leaf-sheltered from the heat,
Soft fledglings flutter timorously near.
Gold-linked laburnum, plumy locust white,
Gone too soon as beauteous women go,
And shouting October with his bugle-horn
Tearing his crimson tatters in delight.
December's hush: the virginal of snow
And miracles of loveliness re-born.

How beautiful the pity of the Earth:
The grass which hides all barren nakedness,
The fleecy blossoms, young maternal mirth,
The music of glad birds, the vine's caress
On fallen things, the trees which swing in prayer
Their fragrant censers, sun-wrought green and gold,
Or standing with uplifted fingers bare
Through the long silence of the year grown old.
Again, forever the recurrent stir
Of bud and blossom, frailest flower and fruit,
Delight of rain and moonlight gossamer
Weaving a mantle, mystical and mute.
Soul: Beholding Beauty's endless sway
What tribute bring you from your hastening day?

When the city mutters in its troubled sleep
And Morning holds communion with the birds,
The cool air hushed, so scarce a leaf is stirred,
I love to walk beneath our trees where keeps
Her vigil, dawn-clad Peace. Soon sunrise peeps
Between the boughs, yet for a time deferred
Is Day's turmoil; Life's struggle is not heard,
But Nature's calm in noiseless billows sweeps.
This garden spot is island in a sea
Of stone, a refuge fresh with dews
Where darting birds their summer spouses choose
And sing unfearing to their loves and me.
Nature gives here the juice that sets us free
And tranquilly life's fetters slip and loose.

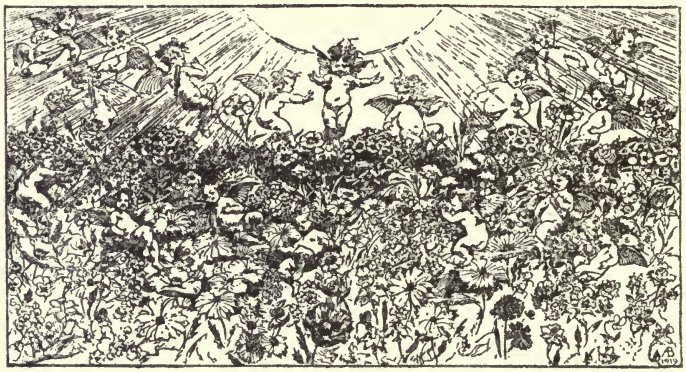
XIII

The trees in meditative pity breathe
Benevolence upon the heart of man,
Waving great arms of love and arms to ban
The approach of evil things, the while they wreathe
A never-fading crown of glossy leaves
To shade the brow of ever-living Pan.
I like to think my frail and mortal hand
Helped plant this temple where no soul can grieve.
I lie down in this sanctuary grove,
Discoursing with the leaves and secret boughs;
Shut from the city's boisterous carouse
Something of Life's serenity to prove;
When the world rages in my ear I love
The good tranquility of Nature's house.

This little forest teaches me that Death
Is but the winter of a life grown old.
Tired limbs no longer ache and the frosty breath
Is caught upon a wind of numbing cold.
A beetle trudges here a six-foot plain,
A flicker drums somewhere I cannot see,
An ant toils what to me seems small and vain,
A bellied toad stares solemnly at me:
Life's circle here complete before me lies.
I meet my brethren, knowing that we all
Are helpless victims of the great Surprise;
And each is listening for Death's whispered call,
Which none will disobey. That we are one,
Beetle and toad and the great burning Sun.

On this familiar slope for many a year
I have lain soft upon the ripened grass,
Drinking of Summer and the generous cheer
Of ruddy Autumn. Very glad I was
To watch these laden boughs sway tremulous
The velvet peaches odorous and red,
And breeze-stirred leafage gently murmurous
Where plums and apples mellow overhead.
I've chirped the goodness of a ripening world
On my thin pipe in never changing phrase,
As locusts shrill ere Autumn leaves are whirled,
Or crickets mourn the happy harvest days,
Or grasshoppers, which frost will silence soon,
Make summer musical with one fixed tune.

August with opalescent afternoons
And Summer tangled in the lisping leaves
Has come to me again; the uncertain boon
Is still with me, the whimsical reprieve
Keeping my eyes alert to a fair world.
Not yet, to me, the untracked night has come
Nor the obliterating shaft been hurled,
Which soon will stretch me passionless and dumb.
Still busy is the thread of living thought,
Which weaves a fabric from the empty air,
The web of fancy out of nothing wrought,
Which words can never grasp or fitly wear;
Something still locked within this prison, I,
Which beats its wings for freedom in the sky.



One thought to me is wine and myrrh and balm:
The oneness of this large and crystal bowl,
And Death, the cool and universal calm
After the struggle. One essential whole
In which life is the common mystery,
Not a sole spark by God bestowed on men;
I, brother to the beetle and the bee,
The busy host of humble brethren.
I like this thought that I am merged in one
Sure brotherhood of dog, night-moth and flower,
Each taper-bearer to our lord the Sun,
Each given his puzzle of a fleeting hour,
And then to sleep — perhaps to wake a rose,
And be most fragrant glad. Perhaps, who knows?

Where the vineyard slopes toward the sun,
Beneath September's apple boughs I lie
Plucking the fruit in blossomy May begun
By sun and rain, mysterious alchemy.
Now is the smell of grapes upon the air
And dreaminess obscures the wildwood hills;
I bed upon the grass absolved of Care,
Drinking the mug the old earth-mother fills,
And still shall fill; new flagons with old wine
Until hot father Sun himself be dead,
Who now so kindly warms these limbs of mine.
Must you too die, old traveler overhead?
But you will shine awhile and I abide
Under stooped apple boughs—Peace at my side.

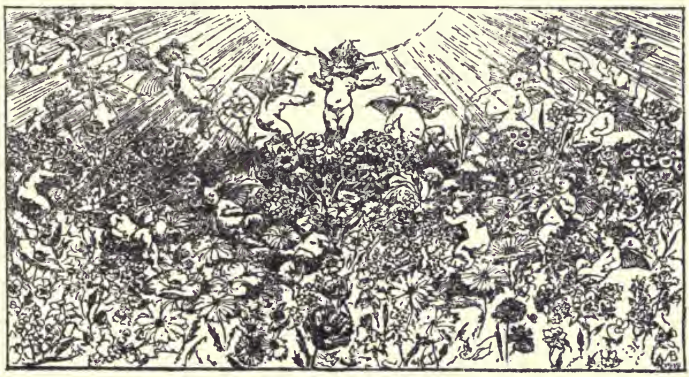
Here let me lie the summer afternoon,
Upon this hillside, redolent with thyme
And strawberry leaves; while in a jangled tune
Distant cowbells tinkle faint a chime,
As if Pan hit his cymbals in some glade,
Lying lazily as I beneath a pine,
Caught in the weavings of the sun and shade,
And breathing balsamed odors rich as wine.
Who can assay this side the dark abyss
An hour more golden than to lie at ease
Voluptuously wanton to the West-wind's kiss,
Infiltrate by the kinship of the trees,
While from the dusty road the teamsters call,
And shadows creep upon the garden wall?

Blue-starred the grass with honeyed, bloomy prunes
Cast prodigal by overhanging boughs;
And deep in these the wasps and bees carouse,
Drunk in the vintage of the afternoon.
Bluejays plunder the ripe grape festoons,
And lured from the hills a pair of wary grouse
Peck at the bunches; far the bawling cows
Complain; slow sail the thistle-down balloons.
Crabapples pave the greedy earth with gold,
A scent of ripeness hangs upon the air
As if some nymph outshook her ruddy hair.
A new-dropped peach close to my hand is rolled—
I wonder is it her love-challenge bold?
I look and listen but she is not there.

To me the coming of each day is sweet,
Whether it be, as now, in golden days
Of bright September, when the woodland ways
Are stirred with sound of flying wings and feet,
And deer flit through the pines, a vision fleet;
Or when we gather 'round the warming blaze
And tell our tales that hold the young amazed,
Or ruddily defy the rain and sleet.
It all is good to me, for there are songs
In everything: in flowers and naked stems,
From cheery crickets, frogs, as well as wrens.
Each in the wondrous symphony belongs.
What dreams, what hopes, what dim, mysterious wrongs
May not Life bring unto the least of them.

I love the bed of dry October grass,
So warm with breath of the wine-laden year;
Scent of dead weeds on breezes as they pass,
Actaeon with his hounds and hunting spear;
Dry mint within my lazy finger reach,
Grasshoppers amid faint rustling stems and leaves;
A dim vague sadness, too profound for speech,
A sympathy with swallows in the eaves,
Which eloquently twitter ere they fly
To the glad lands, yet with a yearning strain,
As those who know the fairest things must die:
The lips of Joy, forever kissed by Pain.
But now how rich the day, dry grass so warm,
Nor lurking anywhere cold Winter's storm.

The leafless garden with its naked stems
A beauty has, more solemn and sedate
Than Summer's rich voluptuous estate.
Like a pale bride it sparkles in its gems
Of rain or icy crystal diadems.
The tracery of twigs so delicate,
And last year's leaves lovingly decorate
The garden's skirts, the year's far-trailing hem.
It is deserted by it's noisy choir:
Wrens, robins, finches, thrush with speckled breast;
And bare of flowers which once the bees possessed;
Gone too, the bees and dead their sweet desire;
Gone, June's delight and bold October's fire,
And now the sober cloak of perfect rest.



In this hushed time when sombre skies weep down,
And trees stand leafless, tragically bare,
And the lost winds moan the measure of despair,
Earth patient in her tears and thorny crown,
I love to walk to every tree-trunk brown
And pat it as my friend. I put it there,
Hoping it would shield with spreading care
Those on the grass when I lie in the ground.
The sober Earth, the barren beds, the trees
Stripped as in death, the pleasant garden, make
A ragged beggar, naked to the ache
Of Winter winds and bitter nights that freeze;
But perfectly I know whole budding seas
Of beauty sleep, which April shall awake.

I who walk here this blossom-time of May,
And hear the joy chants of flute-throated birds,
Shall sleep unhearing some fair summer day.
Lovers, I beg you keep my warning words
As one who knew the love-touch of the Spring,
When the veil is woven by nymph-hands unseen,
Hens cluck and flickers drum and all birds sing,
Lovers, I bid you to each other lean.
Earth brings no other cup so pure as love:
The sun is but the lamp; the moon is dressed
In silver fire to light the way above.
Young lover, hold her close upon your breast,
Listen to the thrush's moonlit song:
"Take while you may, you may not take for long."

MDCCCLV
XII

PERSONAL SONNETS

Beneath this granite stone are reverent laid
My father and my mother, done with strife.
Beside them, worn and wearied out by life,
A brother sleeps. We others too far strayed
From the old haunts. These woods are where we played
And gathered chestnuts in the swift days, rife
With youth and hope when the cricket's fife
In the golden stubble merry music made.
Two have graves afar but sleep as still
As these do here. All skies to Death are fair.
"St. Thomas' School for Boys" was there.
All is the same from this old churchyard hill
As when I sucked from life my boyish fill
Nor ever guessed the coming cloud of care.

St. Thomas' Churchyard, Maryland, July 5, 1902.

I can't believe them when they say you're dead,
You of the lilting laugh and boyish talk,
The breezy sailor air and swaying walk
That spoke of heaving decks. When I have said
How much I love you, you'll not hear. Fled, fled
To the dumb land whose shadow boundaries balk
Words or tears. You have plucked the poppied stalk
Whose fruit is slumber on the eternal bed.
Pleasure, you made contagious and could bind
A wreath of roses on the darkest brow;
Squeeze grapes of gladness in the golden bowl;
Oh spirit by no earthly ill confined
Where wakes your ringing merry laughter now,
Or sleep you with the undisclosing whole?

To my brother Maxwell.

Death forgets us not—no, not one.
Is this large sweep not merciful and best?
Who is not glad when the hard day is done
To fall into oblivion and rest?
No ill can sting the all unconscious head
Nor scorn, nor slander, nor ingratitude.
The disappointing world upon the dead
It's cruel mockeries can not intrude.
Then sleep, my brother, while we bear the ache
Of living; all ache for you is past.
No more will you to bitter mornings wake,
But sleep upon a tranquil sea at last.
Upon the day which memorys your birth,
We lay you down and kiss you back to earth.

To my brother Bryson, February 22, 1904.

True love should neither ask nor give excuse,
But, as the west wind, wayward, wild and free,
Snows down the blossoms from the apple tree,
So Love, with radiant hair and girdle loose,
Showers her entirest self and whispers "Choose,
Here have you all the good and bad of me;
The good is honey-sweet, yet were I thee
The bad I would not utterly refuse."
Dear Love, I will not; what to me may fall
I'll glean and garner, very tenderly,
And in the storehouse of my memory
With perfumes of the heart will it enthrall
So that the bitterest leaf shall precious be,
For Love, if it be Love, will treasure all.

To N. M. W., 1897.

XXX

It may well be, as well I wish it may,
That Death shall claim me first. I could not bear
From your white face to smooth your glossy hair
And know you dumb to all that I might say.
If to our house you must return some day
And find my books, my pen, my empty chair,
But fragments from an ocean of despair,
Then take this verse and read it o'er, I pray.
This is my voice still murmuring in your ear:
"Take comfort, you have had the best of me,
These are the lines which I caressingly
Write now to soothe away your lonely tear.
And, Love, when these last thoughts have brought me near,
Here is a kiss which I have saved for thee."

To N. M. W., January 12, 1889.

Give me one year of love with you, I'll ask
No more of Time; content, like bee, to die
In the supreme of love, bliss-killed. To bask
One long, linked, loving season carelessly
In summer sunshine of your eyes, and feel
Your fending arms so close about me knit;
To push the world afar, while your lips seal
On mine, in solitude, our troth. To sit
One full earth round in sorrow or delight,
In the gods' temple, defiant unto Death.
'Twas so I prayed on our young marriage-night
When new-born love was cradled on your breath.
So now I pray, there is no boon so true
In Time or sweet as one more year with you.

To N. M. W., January 12th, 1907.

My son, how close the tendrils of my heart
Have twined about, and bound you to me fast,
As some old fallen oak, prey of the blast,
Grips to its side where its own seedlings start
A sapling, vigorous. I hope your part
Will reach beyond me, so in you at last
My bad shall lessened be, my good surpassed.
And you grow greater when we fall apart.
This is my resurrection and my bliss
To live in you when I have ceased to live,
To show the world I did a better give
Than I myself. My mortal hope is this.
If such be done, let you nor any grieve
When you have sealed it with a final kiss.

To my son Erskine.

Some men believe that, like the buried seed,
They shall to new and greater glory rise;
I think not so; my plain and homely creed
Paints me no endless life in Paradise.
I am content, like lilies cut at eve,
To yield forever all of perfume sweet,
Nor want I any one too much to grieve
Because no more he hears my coming feet.
To each comes death as well as throbbing life,
I, too, may live again, though I be dead;
Bearing a gallant heart through the world's strife
Living the simple truth unalterèd.
This is my hope for an eternity,
To live again, my child, in thine and thee.

To my son Erskine.

Shakespeare kissed Hamnet's grave, the world slipped on,
Old Priam wept for Hector, but the world
Abated not of flower or leaf or sun.
King David moaned for Absalom, his curled
And smooth-limbed darling, yet Time
Has swallowed all: all tears, all laughs, all men
Nor left a mark. So we from youth to prime,
From dim old age to calm oblivion tend.
Though Death shall harvest all the wealth of love
That now between us warm and pulsing lives,
Yet now a joy all other joys above,
To me your young and true affection gives.
What, though the rose must die with Winter snows;
Is it less sweet the Summer day it blows?

To my son Erskine, on receipt of some verses from him on my forty-seventh birthday.

Who'll guess the mother-heart, O God, who knows,
Or who shall measure, fathomless and true,
That love which, like Christ's pity, boundless flows
In pain and agony and bloody dew.
Guessed are her joys, her gladness measured quite,
But who shall guage the infinite heart-ache
Of her whose love is altered not in spite
Of wrong or shame, who for her great love's sake
Clasped Death's lean hand. Child of her womb, her breast,
Child of her bitter anguish and travail,
All mysteries to her were then confessed
When first she heard the thin, appealing wail.
When others shut you out, all merciless,
Her heart shall yearn above your hopelessness.

A sonnet sequence of two sonnets on Erskine's first leaving home, going to Harvard, September 10, 1897.

How tall you've grown, my baby, first born one.
Your lip is fringed, your shoulders, how stalwart,
And must I yield you, Oh, my son, my son,
You whom I nursed, must we be torn apart?
How many years in silence of the night
My kiss has blessed you, and your sleeping breath
I have o'er hung, more loving than in light,
For sleep so fearfully did mimic death.
God of the Mother, who has wondrous made
The shaggy she-bear willingly to die,
Has made the sparrow bold and not afraid
When from the nest her helpless young ones cry.
In due time swells the breasts with milky flows,
You know the mother-heart; Yea, God, you know.

The fruit of parting is a wealth of wound;
Heart-ache, dumb pain and unreleased cries,
As David wept for Absalom, his eyes
Dropping the salt, hot tears upon the ground,
So I now mourn. The Earth is wrapped around
With sad grey wings which whisper only sighs.
My heart is heavy with its sacrifice,
And nowhere is there any gladness found.
As the she-robin pushes from the nest
Her fledgling brood, to try their timid wings,
Ere launching on the wide ethereal,
So every parting tastes of bitterness,
The tear-blind eyes and deep heart-hungerings,
Make our rehearsal for the last farewell.

On leaving Erskine, when he was sick, Spring, 1901.

Give me your love, Oh friends, where'er you be;
Let my sick heart beat stronger close to yours,
For I am drinking now a cup of misery
Whose bitterness is more than life endures.
Beneath these willows, by the mocking stream,
Upon a bed of boughs, silent he lies,
My boy, his young life made a fading dream;
And like a severed flower he slowly dies.
Oh, that I might push back the spectre, Death,
My strong arms fold him safe, as once he lay
A little babe. That I might give my breath
And go, as soon I must, the silent way;
So might be saved his life but just begun.
Would I might die for him. My son, my son.

A sonnet sequence of two sonnets. Blitzen River, Oregon, August, 1901.

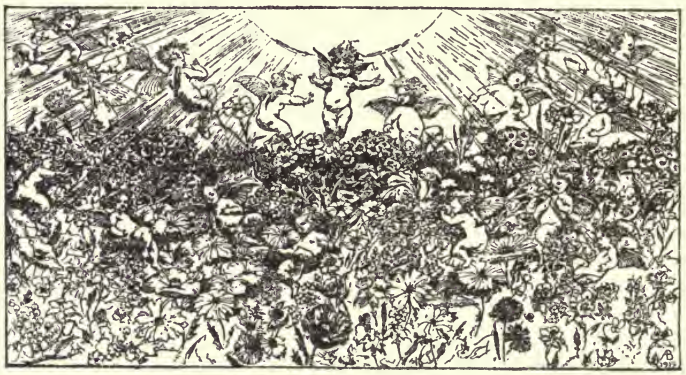
XXXIX

I am oppressed by Earth's vast loneliness,
A solitude which walls me helpless in;
The frowning rocks are deaf to my distress,
The sky recks not in all its glittering spin.
I am alone. Death's breath upon my cheek,
His chilly whisper in my frightened ear.
O, God. O, God. O, God, I seem to shriek,
Altho' I know there is no God to hear.
I cannot bear it. Let me be the first.
Wakeful I moan through watches of the night,
For Death walks with me, Death, the great accursed,
And melts my very marrow with affright.
Here, in this lone and solemn desert land,
My first born dies. Death holds him by the hand.

I'd have you well remember me, my son,
When I am gone, and darkened are my eyes.
Take you what harvest in this message lies
From one who loved you till his days were done.
You have afresh the strange, wide search begun
For happiness beneath Youth's dewy skies,
Led by Love's smiles and lured by his replies.
I wish you Life's unmortal stuff, well won.
Love's wings are fragile as the gilded sails
Of summer butterflies, nor fit for chains.
Who seeks to bind them holds and binds in vain
But only breaks. If change your life assails,
Young bride and bridegroom, and the incense fails,
Claim not by vows what empty husks remain.

A sonnet sequence of four sonnets to Erskine, on his wedding day, September 28, 1910.

Shall limbs be free and not the finer soul?
Shall lovers make a contract at the start
That each owns each? Oh, such slave-chains will smart
Until Love bursts the bondage and control.
Shall Nature, swinging to an endless goal
Through change perpetual in every part,
Be wise and good, and yet the human heart,
If it should change, be branded mean and foul?
Welcome young Love advancing smiling-eyed,
His fragrant self serene as morning star
And clothed in drapery of dreams; nor mar
A holy day by oaths false in their pride.
Ah, happy youth and happy, happy bride,
Enchain not Love to the unknown afar.



If change steals on, seek not the god to fright
By rattling of bolts and threats of pains
And ghosts of iron bows with which you stained
The bud and blossoming of his delight.
Remember that the invisible unguessed might
Of Love is free and will not carry chains.
As it came freely, so must it remain,
Or pass unchallenged into Memory's night.
I would not have you alter; may Love's power
Make sure in comradeship what Love began;
So, hand in hand, you fare your flowery span
Unto the parting in the final hour.
But be the richest of your wedding dower,
You put no taint on Love for law of Man.

Oaths cannot bind, nor what man's law allows,
But only the command of Love, sublime.
Victor of Victors, Conqueror of Time,
And minister within a garnished house.
Love met with love welds lover unto spouse,
Not the frail smoke of altar-breathéd vows.
Suppose you swore that through the rack and rime
Of jostling years you'd keep your youthful prime;
Age still would come and Death at last arouse.
Love too is daily growth, and who his fate
Can stay, where godhead proudly conquering rides.
We are but bubbles on the living tide
And helpless sweep toward the chasmed gate,
And Love, forever free, immaculate,
At his own will, wings glorious at our side.

Medusa curls and cheeks of ruddy tan,
Corded wrists and tragedy black eyes,
Blazing in wrath or wide in stared surprise,
A wee tarantula: our baby, Nan,
Never since Adam gardening began
Has God or Devil packed in such small size
Thunder-clouds, rain-storms, laughter and wild cries;
Bewildering, beloved, exhaustless plan.
Our little dynamo of happiness,
How, as the evening falls, you quiet come
To your dear mother's knee, struck sleepy-dumb,
And lay your curls down for the wished caress,
And then the pillow's tangled tenderness,
And such a comfort in one small fat thumb.

To Nan, July, 1884.

Young mother, nursing life anew begun,
Joy of first motherhood within your eyes,
I watch and weigh when life was first begun,
Growing dizzy with the backward long surmise,
The unsourced river, dim unbroken stream
From life's first stir to this; from this what strife
Through future, limitless; what urge, what dreams
Toward a larger and more winged life.
O kings and plutocrats, can you create
One life you trample into mire for power?
O mothers, rise against this monster, Hate,
Which seizes for its lust your living dower.
I hope this baby breath may breathe of swords
Flashing the death of States and Overlords.

To Nan, on the birth of Nancy, March 16, 1908.

My son, my son, I reach across the sea
My empty arms and pray in helplessness
That you be spared, my little son, to me;
Would there were gods to hearken our distress.
What dreadful spectres ride my soul at night
When I bethink me you may then lie dead
In far off land, forever from my sight.
I silent bear my dark and lonely dread.
Oh, what a prison is this life of ours;
Not gods who might be bought with sacrifice
And prayers, but fixed and unrelenting Powers,
More deaf unto my grief than I to mice.
I cannot pray but only blindly grope,
Stretched in the dust, and clinging, pale, to Hope.

On learning of an accident to Maxwell in the Black Forest, Germany, 1903.

My boy, too often as a lad you were
Silent under blame, misunderstood,
Yet mute, with quivering lips. My memories stir
With love's remorse that I or any could
Blot your young gayety as August rain
Stops crickets' cheery singing. Be more wise
In life. The wisest men the most explain.
Love, understanding, asks for clean replies.
There is no spirit so flaming white as Truth
Whose sword gives sacred wounds. The offerings
Of lies are Dead Sea Fruit, though made in ruth
Empty they are and at the last bear stings.
Go forth with Truth to meet the world. God speed.
My love until the end awaits your need.

To Maxwell, leaving for Cornell, 1904.

My earliest recollection of you, Max,
Is as a visitor two minutes old
In an old rocking-chair, twisting your back,
Peering about upon a world too cold;
Your Indian, swarthy head reared, terrapin-wise;
A strange, uncanny eerie curiousness
Blinking within your black and beady eyes;
Even your dear mother, pale in her weakness,
Thought you a black and eldritch little thing,
So strong to lift your head to look about
Upon the new adventure. Well, my son,
Keep on still looking; try the blamed thing out
With eager search, as was your life begun.
I like to think of your backbone that day;
Still keep it up. Go steadfastly your way.

To Maxwell, on his twenty-first birthday, January 23, 1905.

How peacefully adrift on Sleep's broad tide
My daughter floats, with limp unconscious hands;
Her bright eyes veiled by white and fringed bands.
As folded flowers until the morning bide.
Her head adroop like one pale rose beside
A silent grave of Love in alien lands;
And ever 'twixt her lips fair coral strands,
Her soft breath ebbs and flows in gentle tide.
Sweet miniature of one more fondly dear
I would not have you sleep forever so;
And yet tonight, if your child-soul should go,
What aching load of bitterness and fear,
Which sullen fate is heaping year by year,
Your fair, unblossomed life would never know.

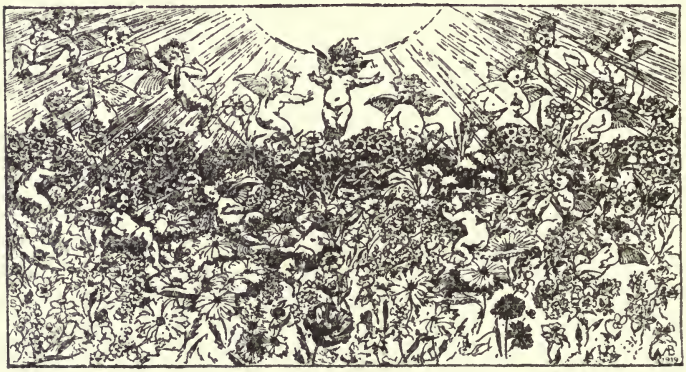
To my daughter, Lisa.

From Italy's blue skies and Capri's isle
Dear Lisa sends love-messages to me.
Calypso of the all-compelling wile,
Who lured Odysseus, roamer of the sea,
Sang not so all-entrancing to his ear
As in my memory sounds my daughter's voice;
Her eyes so quick to brim with pitying tears.
Her lips, in bird-like laughter to rejoice.
That she remembered me in lands afar
Brings me the gladness Love alone can give;
As if, from peaceful heaven, a pure star
Poured down its calm and bade me happier live.
Child of my very blood, I catch the ray
Which in your birth blesses my own birthday.

On receiving a message from Lisa on my birthday, February 20, 1908.

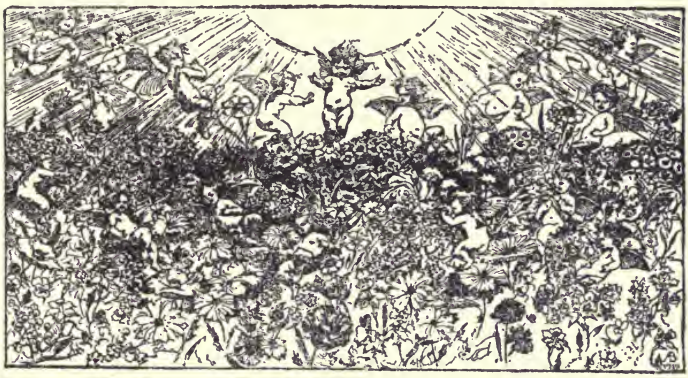
With zealous care in hope of coming fruit
The gardener his young tree watereth,
But Love unselfish nursed your baby breath
And Love unbought cherished the tender shoot
And now your loving thoughts our lives recruit.
Love asks no coin for what it rendereth,
Gives all and nothing asks even to death,
Strips bare the soul and naked standeth mute.
As more the loving and returning Spring
O'erloads the Earth with countless wealth of flowers
And hangs upon her jewels of the showers,
So you with gentle love, sweet Daughter, bring
Treasures past any count or reckoning
And make all glad the slow descending hours.

To Lisa, on her birthday, December 15, 1905.



Blithe-hearted son, there are shadows on the way
Of one made up of sunshine and of all
That gentlehood on which leech-life will prey.
I hope on you from heaven there will fall
The love which loves to set the loved one free
From cobwebb-strands, stronger than iron chain;
The silent, sucking of your sympathy,
Your purpose weak because you dread to pain.
As here I watch your merry, Puck-like pranks,
Shining the light of laughter through the hours,
I would that always, by such murmurous banks,
You might leap faun-like through the primrose flowers.
It wrings my heart to think of you and age,
Or you a prisoner in a narrow cage.

To Berwick, the Blitzen River, 1897.



Our baby youngest. Still the baby boy
Full of blithe roguishness and boyish fun,
A faery gift, your bubbling well of joy.
What rippling rills into Life's waste will run.
You are so like a brother that I had,
Clown, wit and mimic, and withal so sweet,
The thought of him makes me foreboding, sad;
I hate to think Life will you also cheat,
And cloud your sunny heart with shadows cold,
Your gentleness your weakness and undoing.
Dear little son I beg of you be bold.
Live your free self, no matter whose the rueing.
Don't try to carry water in a sieve,
And know the failure of a Life half-lived.

To my son, Berwick, on his going to Cornell, 1906.

LIV

I'm fifty-four; toughened, dust-smeared and scarred
In the sweaty combat of the conquering years
Which have relentlessly with leveled spears
Assailed my soul, battered its shield and marred
By blows on blows, the conflict long and hard,
Until the smiling visage disappears
Of joyous youth, and comes a mask of fears,
Defeats and knowledge won where passions warred.
None can resist Life's cruel, mirthless might:
Who fights has stains to cleanse and wounds to bind.
I will not wish that loving thoughts be kind.
As was my strength, so strove I with my might,
And where I fell, in all the weary fight,
I ask no mercy, nor that eyes be blind.

February 20, 1906.

Fifty-nine today. Once more old Time
Has cast upon my back a tyrant year:
God knows I have enough, must I then rhyme
Some jolly canticle because more near
The inevitable end has come? Why not?
Life, Life is good: I'll drain it bold and fast,
Bravely and rough, and find it sweet. Forget
Its cheats and sorrows. May it forever last.
Ha. Stop. If life should never end, what then?
Why, what a sodden pack the world would hold,
Ancients of soul, droning, brain-crippled men
Telling the wisdom of the days of old.
No. Death is growth; a harmony, not strife.
Life the crowned gate for Death, as Death for Life.

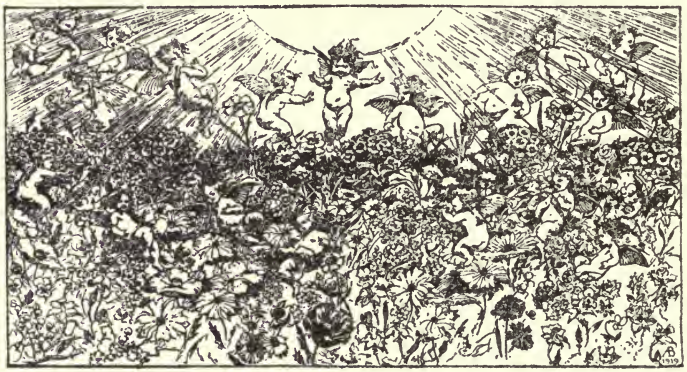
February 20, 1911.

Faithful in hunger, cold and bitter rain,
With a sure trust which shames the love of man,
Faithful unto the hand which gave you pain;
Were't blows, or bread, your love unfaltering ran.
Faithful. Aye, that's the word. I would to God
I could be faithful as you were to me,
Forgiving all, the anger and the rod,
And loyal always, all unfalteringly,
Unwhimpering you toiled, tired, in sleet and snow.
What man has shown the love of your dog heart
Or deep devotion which your eyes could show?
Alas, alas, my dog, that we should part.
Your head here in my lap till your last breath,
And your mute eyes, faithful unto death.

To Star, Erskine's Irish Setter, killed November 2, 1904.

An old, decrepit, time-worn hound am I,
On three legs limping, I, who ran so fleet.
My muzzle grey, and dim and bleared the eye
Which saw so keen and led my flying feet.
My jaws with broken teeth now harmless, quite;
I, who was once the leader of the pack;
Those polished fangs terrific in the fight,
Tearing the greg wolf's throat, he on his back.
My springing limbs which swept me on before,
Like a swift wind, across the boundless plain,
Smashing the quarry, shall do so no more,
But now all shrunken are and rent with pain.
I'll taste no more the hot and furious fray.
Eyes dim, legs stiff, teeth gone, I've had my day.

To Bravo, an old wolf-hound of the P Ranch.



Where rest the dead upon this wind-kissed slope,
Between the blue of river and of sky,
Where birds tune silence into mystery
Of Life and Death beyond our reach or scope,
I rest and muse how I must creep and grope
Awhile, and then like these shall quiet lie,
Part of the large, serene eternity,
Unstirred by agonies of fear or hope.
As I here come so shall some other heart,
To rest above me, hearing still the hum
Where roars the city. I, a dead thing then,
Confess now my weak and stumbling part,
Hypocrisies and lies big in the sum,
Yet brother I was much like other men.

At Riverside Cemetery, July 1, 1894.

Once more I am by Ocean's breezes fed,
And watch the foam-sheets creep upon the shore,
Hear the sea-lion's hoarse and guttural roar,
The sad complaint of seagulls overhead.
Once more I thrill with wondering awe and dread
Of this great Ocean, which for evermore
Has poured its curling thunder, and shall pour,
For Oh so long, after we all are dead.
I mark the courage of the wind-swept pines,
Their hair blown back from off their twisted brows
By many a bout when wild the winds carouse.
Illimitable the wide Immortal shines;
Only the sea has an eternal house.

At Ecola, August 27, 1904.

I am so thirsty for the utter rest
Which only trees on mighty mountains know;
That hour seems welcome, when in Earth's dumb breast
I shall lie down and let the vexed world go.
So great a turmoil for such little fruit,
That fruit so quick unto a sure decay;
A gnawing worm at Pleasure's twisted root,
Black night engulfing every radiant day;
Ambition ending in a bitter taste,
The subtleties of love creating pain,
Until the stretch of years seems a wide waste,
So great an effort and so little gain.
Thwarted and hopeless, too soul-tired to weep,
Why not upon the mother-breast to sleep?

August, 1905.

As I lie here, a prisoner to my bed,
A robin drops upon the birch-stem bare,
Close to my window, cocks his eager head,
Stretching his wings which conquest make of air.
Oh, breezy traveler to the blither South,
Oh, darling of old Earth, the wise and kind,
To you unknown is all that wasting drouth,
And gloomy desert of the questioning mind.
Lend me your wings, let me assault the clouds,
Swoop from the blue into a tree and sing,
Sing reckless of the lower-moving crowds,
Glad of the sun, the triumph of my wing.
Let me, too, roam at will, through upper skies,
The sunset glorious, glorious the sunrise.

December, 1904.

Yes. Would I had the hopeful wings of birds
That in the frosty dawn gather for flight
To southern skies. Would that like them I might
Soar and sail above the feeding herd
Which starves in ignorance. Oh, not an hour deferred
My travel upward through the enormous night.
And will there come that sunrise of delight,
When eyes are luminous and song is heard?
The vision seems so clear, the day so far,
All masters trampled and the stagnant pen
Of Ignorance drained to a field of flowers.
Love universal, hanging like a star
Above a songful earth of new-born men,
Where Peace and Plenty guide the happy hours.

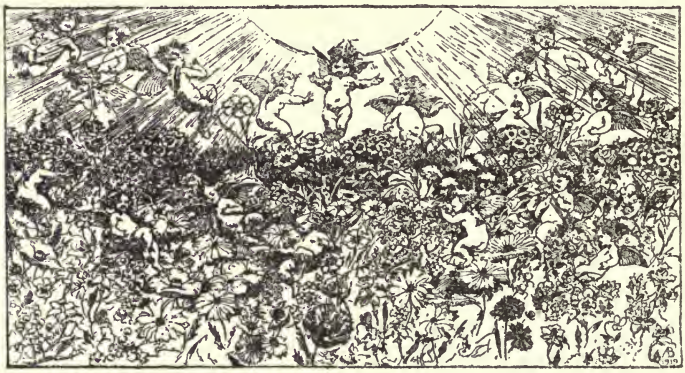
The bare and russet hills serene and high
Watch the green Snake, which with many a coil
And curve, with mighty swirl and boil,
Slips between their teeth, resistlessly,
Down to the sea; a sheet of blue the sky,
And on the river's edge the herons toil:
Along the hill-crest far above this moil
A tiny horseman specks the brilliant sky.
Straight rise the frowning battlemented rocks;
In them the ravens build, the gentle rock-doves coo;
Above the bend the hills are filmed with blue
And dotted with the rancher's grazing flocks.
The Earth is scarred from ancient fiery shocks,
But fair the fields where men their hopes renew.

Man's battle with the Titans is begun,
And on the narrow strip beneath the heights
Orchards cluster, flecked with sunny lights,
An oasis from the parched desert won.
So heavy hang the peaches in the sun
That limbs are propped, and children, happy wights,
Plunder unchecked with shrill cries of delight
As in the fragrant shade they laughing run.
When first I saw where now these shout and play
An Indian camp nestled in solitude,
I, young moustached, with shoulder-strap and sword,
And through these hills despairingly at bay
The brown men stood, with wives and naked brood.
The orchards bloom, but gone the tawny horde.

Going up the Snake River twenty odd years after making the same journey to the Nez Perce War (1877).

Here was the fire, now lifeless ashes grey,
Our rough table beneath the willow tree,
And here the flattened grass whereon they lay;
But all are gone, save just a bird and me:
A magpie, royal in his black and white,
Eager to peck what leaving he may find;
I move, and he with screams betakes to flight,
Leaving me in solitude behind.
This was our camp where, cheek to Nature's breast,
I and my children sucked in Life's delight,
By day the river murmured us to rest,
The march of suns our wonder-roof at night.
Back to their life the eager birds have flown,
And I, in deepest silence, sit alone.

Camp on Blitzen River, September 8, 1907.



To those oppressed on beds of weariness
How good that outer world which is denied.
What heavy wall the stricken one divides
From Nature's kind, exceeding loveliness.
Flowers come like a loving child's caress,
A breath from Mother Earth to the bedside,
Opening the doors of longing, fragrant, wide,
To all that should the earthly pilgrim bless.
Here, by my prison, like voluptuous maids
Flaunting their beauty, your bright tulips smile,
Daughters of Earth, who, with a subtle wile,
Lead out my thoughts to brooks and sunny glades,
Where, glorious in sunshine and in shade,
Tall tulip-throated nymphs the hours beguile.

Tulips sent by H. T. A. when I was sick, January 17, 1909.

Awed by the wilderness to something kin to fright,
Among the wind-tuned pines I wakeful lie,
And look into the deep, star-frosted sky,
Until the peak above is tipped with light,
And golden morning puts to happy flight
The antic bats of night's black fantasy.
How swift the years hasten from me and fly.
How soon must come the ever-endless night.
Can anyone, of me, in friendship tell
That I scored white and high some little mark;
Not for fear of the eternal dark,
Nor for the dread of Superstition's hell,
But not to waste the ne'er returning spark.
I would that I had bravely lived, and well.

This hand which now upon the page doth lie
Shall one day turn to dust; mind, hand and will
Melt back to earth and be forever still:
A curious spark that vanished utterly.
But ere it goes here shall my spirit try
To reach beyond the grave so silent, chill,
To lives which after me shall live and thrill,
And beg them for a shred of memory.
I tugged my ant-wise hour that men might grow
To Justice nearer, larger in their ken,
And in the seat of God at last to sit,
Feeling this truth, which it is good to know:
He serves himself who serves his fellow men.
I pray you think of him who here has writ.

In eddies, buffeted and torn, I am
A bit of drift cast on a restless shore;
The city ominous with sullen roar,
A heartless hunger and a feverish sham;
Its streets, accursed dugs of a curst dam,
Where childhood's sun is blotted out before
It has gilt one of Life's despairings o'er:
Old age unworthy and despoiled of calm.
If tears could bless the desert where they fell,
These stones would blossom as Hesperides.
But man prefers to soothe with charity
His careless cruelty which fashions hell,
Binding with blood the temple-stones which tell
Of Moloch's ruthless inhumanity.

In New York City.

I said I would address my naked soul.
Soul, you are all that is or e'er can be;
All heights, all depths are yours, the majesty
Of heaven, hate of hell; to you unrolls
Out of the infinite the secret scroll,
On which Life letters the long mystery.
You question Death fearless and haughtily,
As one who is the Master of the whole.
No bars can jail you and no mandate bind.
You burst all bonds and like a heaven-born bird
Soar the empyrean, where your song is heard
Among the stars, leaving the earth behind.
You are the light within the shining mind;
And yet, O Soul, you grope so helpless blind
Where darkness covers and the deep is stirred.

My sixtieth birthday, February 20, 1912.

Once more I lie upon the grassy spot
Where, years gone by, we pitched our summer tent,
My sons and I; it cannot be forgot;
Here was the shaded path by which we went
Down to the little beach and rippled pool
Of our friendly river; strokes our axes left
Where we chopped out a bower in willows cool;
Now silent, of their restless youth bereft
The sun still shines as bright; the river flows
As murmurous as when it soothed our sleep;
Here was their bed, where the rose-brier grows,
Not anything for long our impress keeps.
They all have gone their ways, and, close to tears,
I muse upon the veiled and hurrying years.

Blitzen River, September 9, 1912.

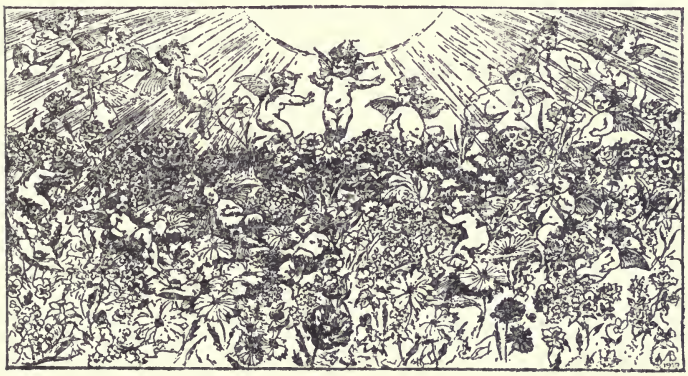
We gnash and chafe, as in an angry sea
A storm-worn spar is fretted on the rocks;
Idiot Custom self-expression mocks
And blights the perfect fruitage of our tree;
Genius, a martyr to stupidity;
The rarest flower tramped by the baaing flocks.
Life should be cupped in Love, as hollyhocks
Enfold and feed the dusted, vagrant bee.
Both joy and grief must hasten to the grave,
But there's a joy can take a finer mould
And past the grave its thrill of rapture send:
To be One's self, not Superstition's slave,
To join the brave, rebellious, noble-souled,
Who lift Life upward to an endless end.

My sixty-fourth birthday, February 20, 1916.

I have had friends, a very multitude,
Who loaned me money, gave me much advice,
Who with their laughter my sad soul renewed,
And sent me gifts, counting not the price;
Who praised my wit, my courage, and my face,
Who visited me, sick, at my bedside;
Who'll miss me from my long accustomed place,
A day or two, when I have fitly died.
But the friend is he who tells to me my fault,
Naming behind my back my virtues, loud,
Who purifies my taint with loving salt;
Boldly rebuking the gossip of the crowd,
And gathers with me where the eternal are,
A life-lamp clear as the white evening star.

When I survey the night's star-lettered space,
And think how pitiful the narrow span
Bridging on to death the life of man,
I grow despairful humble of the race,
Which Time devours; and eyes of the heavenly place
Watch so indifferent. Is there a plan?
And shall we ever guess how all began?
I watch the stars with all man's pride abased.
I am a brother to a flickering fly,
Set in eternity but for an hour,
Then gone as the desert's momentary flower.
What matters what I do? This thing called I
Is but the play of fates. I live, I die,
The helpless victim of an unknown power.

My sixty-second birthday, February 20, 1914.



Among the elemental scars I sit,
The Earth's huge bones; not any life astir;
The warred and twisted pines and wind-disheveled firs
Moan an eternal requiem. These split,
Hell-molten rocks, where once dread Chaos writ,
Now fixed in rugged, bleak, relentless spurs,
Long after Evening's purple shadow blurs
The lower world, are by the sun-shafts lit.
The Earth lies at my feet, vast roll on roll
Of Titan waves, dissolved in billowy blue,
And here is Silence and Eternity.
I am above the things which vex the Soul,
But in my loneliness I know it true:
Down in the lives of men, there would I be.

On Mt. Hood.

LXXVI

Life is so short, it should, it seems, be splendid.
The evening sky repeats the morning glow
Upon the hilltops, 'till the day be ended;
And from the peaks a larger scene below.
To know, yes, kiss the chiseled face of sorrow,
Watching the hooded figure's footsteps pass;
To dream for some a perfecter tomorrow,
Happier feet above the covering grass,
Nor lose the echoes from Life's ceaseless laughter,
Which brooks repeat and nodding flowers declare;
Not moaning for a shadowy hereafter,
But beating back grim sable-winged despair.
Nor weary grow the restless feet of youth
In passioned search for the white throne of Truth.

To my children.

Take not such bitter heed of coming death.
'Tis but to sleep within the bosom old.
Through the whole battle draw a rebel's breath,
And dare to drink the beauty manifold.
How gay the lark lilts on the dewy plain;
The young bear-cubs rough-tumble in their play;
Deep Summer groves stir to a nymph's refrain
And thrush and blackbird pipe their roundelay
As sweetly-clear as ever they did call
To love-lost Helen, or to Merlin, wise.
'Tis joy, not woe, holds every man in thrall.
There is no day but holds some glad surprise.
Still beauty unto newer beauty grows,
And night, as well as day, a glory shows.

I of the past salute you who shall live.
I, who a moment hold the secret flame
Which you shall take with all it has to give
Of happiness and misery and shame.
To everyone the certain ripened fruit,
So darkly seeded by the buried dead,
I of this present, ere I too be mute,
Salute you lovingly as my kindred,
Who e'er you be, nor any blame I cry
If you be vile, but give you pitying tears
That Fate has cursed you from a hopeless sky
With worser lot and sorrow-smitten years.
The greater villain brother more to me,
That he is deeper cursed by dark eternity.

My Sixty-fifth Birthday, February 20, 1917.

If any would for me build a true bier,
Bring my dumb ashes to a pleasant spot
And scatter them without despairing tear
About a young oak. So by time forgot
I shall be joyous in the strong oak's veins
And laugh from out his leaves to the blue sky,
Rejoice in summer sun and winter rains
And know perhaps a gentler ecstasy
Than this life gives. Birds frolic in the boughs
And breezes play. And so the seasons pass.
Lovers I know will come to kiss their vows
And lie awhile upon the whispering grass.
And some who knew me may come here to give
A petal of the heart while yet they live.

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